

# HUMANITY

*René ten Bos*

The philosophical city knows of only one evil. Sophistry is its name. It is embodied by certain parvenu-like and invariably well-dressed people who earn a living by teaching the younger inhabitants of the city lessons about wisdom and beautiful speech. Sophists make a lot of money. Protagoras of Abdera, the first philosopher identified as a sophist, is reputed to charge a fee of roughly 100 *minae* which would now amount to about 150,000 American dollars. It is true, a course by Protagoras can take more than a year, but it is by any standard a gurguesque fee. In terms of rewards, the organization of sophistry can certainly be seen as a predecessor of the contemporary business school.

Plato, poor Plato, hates anything that is fashionable and is at pains to combat the evil of sophistry. He argues that sophists are immersed in a web of lies: they are mixers, artisans, technicians, or manufacturers of untruth. Nowadays, we read the same stuff about management gurus and about business schools. Not everything that Plato says, however, would resonate with contemporary criticisms of business schools. Sophists, he argues must violate the worthiness of philosophy because they have worked with their bodies. Before they become sophists, they were porters, wrestlers, in short, people who used their filthy bodies. That is surely something that can neither be said of managers nor of business schools. It should come as no surprise that Plato's book about the republic has oftentimes been interpreted as the first handbook for management.

Plato's complaints about the artisans of words are particularly sordid: he speaks about dwarfish people with vulgar occupations that cannot but mutilate the soul. The sophist is, according to Plato, a workman who gave up work but who has in no way been able to ward off the physical and mental deformities that is its inevitable result. Rich he may be, but he continues to be dwarfish, mutilated, and vulgar. This is, of course, what only a real philosopher (such as Plato himself or Socrates) is able to see. Evil is always ugly – especially when it is keeping

up appearances. Socrates, for that matter, never kept up appearances. We know that. Indeed, his shameless ugliness is what made him so beautiful. It is better to confront those who are responsible for the management of the state with a guy like him than with ugly dwarfs who can never lay off their dwarfishness.

Here is a question that I would like to ask: Is the business school of the future a place for ugly dwarfs who have experienced with their bodies the all-importance of money or a place for beautiful Platonists who feel only disdain for those who need bodies in order to obtain money?

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If we are to believe Plato, sophists are ugly. But did they *think* or *say* ugly things? Let us go back to Protagoras who is the first and therefore the most important of the entire bunch. Unfortunately, nothing of his written word survives. But we know from other texts that he spoke many beautiful words and one of these words I had to learn by heart when I was a student of philosophy: 'Man is the measure of all things, of those which are that they are, and of those which are not, that they are not'.

This is what pisses the true Platonist off. According to him, the sophist is a harbinger of evil. If it is true that man is the measure of all things, then wisdom or sensible speech will become virtually impossible. Nothing is a thing in itself for it is only a thing for you, for me, or for someone else. The same thing, depending on your or my 'measure', can be light for me or heavy for you. In fact, the very idea of sameness is jettisoned by the sophists. Everything has become relative and since what appears to me now will not necessarily be what appears to you or what will appear to me tomorrow, everything has become subject to change. And if everything becomes both relative and transient, how the hell can the sophist claim that wisdom is still possible? And mind you, this is exactly what he claims when he pretends to be teaching. What the sophist stands for is evil for his ideas deny the possibility of truth and wisdom. And what would life in the city of philosophical citizens be if both cannot be attained?

How does the sophist respond? No, no, you get me wrong, Socrates. I do not deny the possibility of wisdom or even its existence. On the contrary, I claim that wisdom is available for a man, provided that he is able to change the bad things appearing to him into good things. Things can be made better, and what I mean by this is not that they

can be made more truthful but that they can be made more useful, more beneficial, or more healthy. In fact, this is what my musings about the human measure are all about. It is simply narrow-minded to think of truth as something which is on a par with betterment or quality. *Things can be better without being truer.* Truth, in other words, is not a category which is indispensable to the good life. Usefulness and health are. Yet, they are not the same to everyone, to any *man*. Anyway, wisdom doesn't need the bloody truth.

In a manifesto we should, perhaps, not quote, but 'shoot from the hip'. Well, John Wayne decided to consult some famous political manifestos and guess what he did encounter? Right. An awful lot of quotes! He even consulted management manifestos (for example, *Business Process Redesign: A Manifesto for a Business Revolution*) and came across a lot of highly intelligent and beautiful quotes. To shoot from the hip is fine with John, but manifestos should not be stupid (even though they can be stupid). It is well known how doubtful Marx and Engels were about their particular manifesto: they even added footnotes to it. So, I have already inserted a rather short quote and now I will insert a rather lengthy one and then I will engage in an awkward albeit brief philosophical discussion about this:

I do know many things which are unbeneficial for men – foods and drinks and drugs and countless others – but are still beneficial, and some which are neither beneficial nor unbeneficial for men, but are beneficial for horses; some only for oxen, and others for dogs. And then some which are not beneficial to any of these, but are beneficial to trees; and some which are good for the roots of the tree, but bad for its branches, just as dung is good when it's laid on the roots of any plant, but if you put it on the young branches and shoots, it destroys everything. Then, also, oil is utterly bad for all plants and is extremely damaging to the hair of all animals except man. In fact, it's actually beneficial to men's hair, and to the rest of the body. And the good is something so varying and manifold, that this particular thing is good for men's bodies, externally, while, internally, the very same thing is extremely bad.

I do not know what you might think but I love this passage. It is the kind of thinking that Plato attributes to Protagoras. I admire the subtlety with which the speaker moves from the human to the animal and from the animal to the thing and then from the thing back again to the human. Man may be the measure of all things, but it seems

that Protagoras adopts a far more radical standpoint: each thing, alive and lifeless, is its own measure. If we understand this, then we can also understand how easy it is to go from man to animal and from animal to things and vice versa. There are only zones of indeterminacy between them.

So then, why is this evil? Badiou, contemporary Platonic radical and self-declared militant and defender of drastic deeds in our pusillanimous lives, argues that the sophist's relativism privileges meaning over truth. For a bloke like Gorgias, nothing truly exists, nothing can be truly apprehended, and nothing can be truly communicated. Only rhetoric, Gorgias claims, reigns supreme. For Badiou, this merely opens the door to religion: there is no truth with which to refute the zealots of this world. One should bear in mind that religion's hallmark is its perennial search for meaning rather than for truth. Such a search – there can be no misunderstanding about this – must be steeped in blood. However, this is something which can only be grasped by truly non-religious people and not by those who seek inspiration in the work of contemporary sophists such as Nietzsche or Wittgenstein. These are, in fact, religious people who think that they know about truths whereas they are only consumers and producers of that most deadly thing of all: meaning. If Nietzsche, this unthinking idiot, is right in claiming that truth is an army of metaphors and metonymies and nothing else, then we have skilfully destroyed truth. Yes, Nietzsche's silly and evil agenda is to replace mathematics by poetry. As a consequence, we are bogged down in a deadly relativism which feeds on the market of meanings and has done in with any concept of truth. Only Plato, Descartes, and others who embrace the truth of mathematics can save us from this miserable state of affairs.

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Protagoras is the biggest culprit of all for the relativist misery started with him. The best way to counteract this evil tendency is to rephrase or rework the infamous quote: 'Man is the measure of all things ...'. You proceed in two steps. First, you flatly deny that man is the measure of all things. Whatever measure there is, it must lie outside man, in an objective realm to which men can only aspire by dint of mathematics and philosophy. Second, and this is the truly important step, you turn man himself into a thing – and consequently, you will find out that he is no longer afflicted by a flux of appearing things but simply relates as a mathematically thinking subject to a world of mathematically calculable objects. In other words, the subject is the thing and the object is just what it is – an object rather than a thing, or at least a thing

that does not think. The difference between a thing and an object is that the former can, as Protagoras was fully aware, be its own measure and that the object is only an object in relation to a subject.

The subject must become a thing in order to escape the endless affliction by things of the world. The human being can only be liberated if he is rendered immune to animals and things. Protagoras's zones of indeterminacy are not particularly helpful here for they undermine this immunity. At the heart of the enlightenment lies the desire to replace the world and its things by a world of objects that is navigated by a mathematical mind. Descartes refers to this mind as a thinking thing, a *res cogitans*. The world and its objects is the 'extended thing', the *res extensa*. The thinking thing, insofar as it is a human rather than a divine thinking thing, is not only thinking. It also feels and as a feeling thing, not as a thinking thing, it relates to the extended thing. Importantly, however, it is not the body that feels but the thinking thing, that is, the mind. The body is condemned to such a level of passivity that it has almost vanished from the world. It cannot even feel, or if it feels, it does so in a confused and obscure rather than a clear and orderly way, which is why it is, for a scientist at least, utterly irrelevant. Science, Erich Kästner once argued, is what makes the world vanish. The archaeologist or the historian of art does not see a church but he sees walls, towers, icons, and other remnants from a past that is in need of mathematical or scientific clarification.

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The idea of a thing that thinks and of a non-thinking and extended thing is, of course, informed by the idea of a thing that persists: things in a Cartesian universe are, unlike things in the sophist's universe, not transient or impermanent. They subsist, they partake in substance. The shapes that a piece of wax can take, Descartes famously explains, are constantly flexible and changeable so that they are as unreliable as sophist chatter. Thing is, as Heidegger taught us, another word for reliability. From what I feel and sense, I cannot really figure out of what the wax is – it remains unclear and obscure to me, but the mind, my mind, the thinking thing that is me and that constitutes my humanity should take off the shapes of the wax as if it were clothes in order to see it 'nude'. Only the thinking thing can see the naked truth under all appearances which are deceitful. Where the world of the sophist is endlessly wrapped and folded, Descartes offers us a thinking thing that stands naked in a naked world. It is this naked thing that has come to constitute our view of humanity. Paradoxically, man and not beast has become the only naked animal in the world. Its protectors

claim that it is its very nudity that elevates the thinking thing from the animal kingdom.

If there is any sophist inspiration, then it is this: a profound desire not only to dress up the world of things but also a desire to see this world as already dressed, as tissue, as apparel, as something that can be endlessly folded. Plato and Badiou think that this is evil and their answer to evil is one grand effort to mathematically undress the world. This is why they object to poetry, fashion, clothes ... But why would we not consider the thing as clothing rather than as nudity? In a famous passage of the *Meditations*, Descartes wonders whether there are thinking things under the hats and clothes that he sees when he looks out of his window. As Perniola pointed out not very long ago, we must bring our attention to those hats and clothing rather than to the ghost and the machines.

Human life is a tissue and it takes place within a world that is itself a tissue. Not that superb thinkers such as Plato, Descartes, or Badiou would agree with this. They think the human being as a naked thing. Take Kant, another example of this baleful tendency. He would definitely condemn every effort to reduce the human being to a thing, an instrument, or resource, as unethical. No *Human Resource Management* for the famous Prussian! But his own view of the ethical subject is very thing-like. At the end of *Critique of Practical Reason*, he wonders what a human being would be if it would abide by the moral law. Would it not be an automaton, a puppet in a theatre, an automatic duck? In short, in contemplating ethics, Kant finds himself with Descartes in a world of automatons and ghosts. How could it be else? If the naked truth behind the world of appearances is the noumenal thing-in-itself (the thing stripped bare of its appearances), then this nakedness can only be apprehended by a naked human thing, a thinking thing, a thing without feeling, or a noumenal subject. As subject, man is reduced to a thing-in-itself and only as such is he able to have other things-in-itself for-itself.

You can rely on the thing. On the thing, there is *Verlässlichkeit* (reliability). Man cannot therefore be the measure of things and should become a thing in itself: naked rather than clothed, unfolded rather than wrapped up, developed rather than undeveloped. The sophist is so badly wrong because he thinks man in terms of relations: his truths are merely products of what he is and where he is rather than universal and absolute truths.

The Platonist objects to this view of the world as an all-engulfing tissue, where everything is relative, and replaces it by a topological nirvana where thinking things, ethical things, ethical automatons, and thinking automatons dwell. Things are securely placed beyond empiricism, social background and all other dismal instances of heteronomy. Now, we have autonomous thinking things capable of grasping or experiencing truths that can never be put into perspective. Admittedly, you can rely on these automated things, but haven't they left the world of sensible things, the world of animals, the world of flowers and trees, the world of perfumes, minerals, and rocks? The price to be paid for *Verlässlichkeit* (reliability) is *Verlassenheit* (solitude).

Since the Renaissance, we have increasingly embraced humanism as detached reliability. *I take sides with the sophist intervention*: we are tissue in a world of tissue. We are not naked. We are not isolated. We cannot but rely on appearances. We have meaning rather than truth.

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So, that was quite a lot of philosophical mumbo-jumbo for a manifesto. Sorry for that, dear reader. What do I expect the business school of the future to be? Expect? I don't expect nice things to happen there. There will only be more strife for reliability, courage, morality and action and as a consequence we will see more puppets, more automatons, in short, more 'things'. This is, I suggest, a profoundly stupid thing to do in an unreliable world. And it is against this that the sophists already warned us.

We need, Baudrillard once argued, delusional minds in a delusional world. We need to understand that wisdom and truth are not natural partners. We need more animals, more bodies, more filth. We need meaning rather than truth. We need drugs and alcohol rather than sobriety. We need sex rather than chastity. We need distortions of the truth. We need Leibnizan mathematics rather than Cartesian mathematics. We need baroque. We need to understand the clothes rather than the ghosts. We need sophistry rather than managerial Platonism. And most important of all, we need not feel exasperated by all our insolences and should, like the sophist, humbly welcome the money that we can earn with this.

It is always better to be an ugly dwarf than a beautiful thing.